**“Discovering Text Complexity”**

**Gina Wilmurth**

**ELA Content Specialist, NWEA**

[**Gina.wilmurth@nwea.org**](mailto:Gina.wilmurth@nwea.org)

Participants will understand the importance of considering text complexity when planning instruction and assessment. They will know the difference between quantitative and qualitative measures of complexity. They will be aware of various quantitative tools that are available, the differences among them, the usefulness of each, and the methods for utilizing each to determine the readability of a chosen piece of text. They will also know how to apply qualitative measures to a chosen text.

**Getting Passages**

Some sources for passages:

US Government websites are good sources for science and social studies passages (e.g., [www.usgs.gov](http://www.usgs.gov), [www.nasa.gov](http://www.nasa.gov), [www.archives.gov](http://www.archives.gov), [www.ourdocuments.gov](http://www.ourdocuments.gov), [www.nps.gov](http://www.nps.gov)).

Project Gutenberg ([www.gutenberg.org](http://www.gutenberg.org)) is a good source for literary passages.

Passages that can be copied and pasted in a Word document work best for the following steps.

**Quantitative Measures**

**Word Count and Flesch-Kincaid Readability**- Available in Microsoft Word. Word Count appears at the bottom left of the page. You must enable your version of Word to deliver F-K readability statistics as part of the Spelling and Grammar check. See office.microsoft.com for instructions. (Direct link: <http://office.microsoft.com/en-us/help/test-your-document-s-readability-HP010354286.aspx?CTT=1> )

**Lexile**- Lexile measurement was developed by MetaMetrics and is commonly found on passages and books.

Save passage as plain text. Access Lexile Analyzer through [www.lexile.com](http://www.lexile.com). (You must register as a user the first time and create a UN/PW, which is free.) Submit your plain text file to the Lexile Analyzer for a Lexile measure.

**ATOS**- This is the readability formula used by Renaissance Learning for Accelerated Reader books. They also make it available for free for individual use.

Go to <http://www.renaissance.com/products/accelerated-reader/atos-analyzer>. Copy and paste your text or upload the file to get an ATOS level.

**Qualitative Measures**

**Coh-Metrix Text Easability Assessor**- This free tool gives percentile scores for five characteristics of text, as well as a narrative description of noteworthy characteristics of the text and an additional Flesch-Kincaid measurement.

Access at <http://tea.cohmetrix.com/> ; requires registration. Copy and paste text directly into the tool for analysis.

(Also available for free at <http://129.219.222.66:8084/Coh-Metrix.aspx> , but results aren’t immediately available at this site; you must check the site later for the results. This site also includes a library of texts that have already been analyzed and saves your texts in a personal library as well.)

**Rubrics**- There are many rubrics available online, but some teachers will prefer to create their own. A good place to start looking is <http://achievethecore.org/> .

Clear definitions of the qualitative dimensions can be found in the Fisher-Frey rubric at <http://www.ascd.org/ASCD/pdf/journals/ed_lead/el201306_Fisher-Frey-Rubric.pdf> .

An example of a **custom rubric**, which can be used for literary or informational texts, is included as page 4 of this handout.

Here’s a resource for using the quantitative tools mentioned here, plus a few more, from Achieve the Core. *Note: SourceRater is now called TextEvaluator.* All of these are available for free except DRP.

**Updated Text Complexity Grade Bands and Associated Ranges from Multiple Measures**[[1]](#footnote-1)

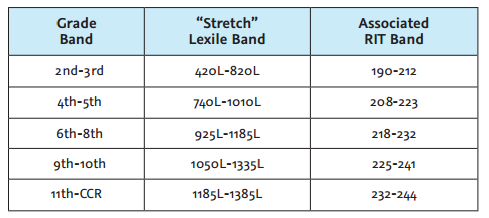
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Common Core Band** | **ATOS** | **Degrees of Reading Power®** | **Flesch-Kincaid[[2]](#footnote-2)** | **The Lexile Framework®** | **Reading Maturity** | **SourceRater** |
| **2nd – 3rd** | **2.75 – 5.14** | **42 – 54** | **1.98 – 5.34** | **420 – 820** | **3.53 – 6.13** | **0.05 – 2.48** |
| **4th – 5th** | **4.97 – 7.03** | **52 – 60** | **4.51 – 7.73** | **740 – 1010** | **5.42 – 7.92** | **0.84 – 5.75** |
| **6th – 8th** | **7.00 – 9.98** | **57 – 67** | **6.51 – 10.34** | **925 – 1185** | **7.04 – 9.57** | **4.11 – 10.66** |
| **9th – 10th** | **9.67 – 12.01** | **62 – 72** | **8.32 – 12.12** | **1050 – 1335** | **8.41 – 10.81** | **9.02 – 13.93** |
| **11th – CCR** | **11.20 – 14.10** | **67 – 74** | **10.34 – 14.2** | **1185 – 1385** | **9.57 – 12.00** | **12.30 – 14.50** |

Here are links to two other free sources for text evaluation. I’ve never used either, so I can’t speak to their ease of use of utility, but they might be worth looking at.

**TextEvaluator**, by ETS. Very new. See <https://texteval-pilot.ets.org/TextEvaluator/> for info.

**Reading Maturity Metric**, by Pearson. Also a new site, still in development. <http://www.readingmaturity.com/rmm-web/#/>

This table shows the level of complexity of texts that students should be able to handle independently at the end of each grade. *Note to MAP users: RIT bands here are NOT norms. Rather, they reflect a trajectory toward CCR.*



Here are some additional links to resources to help students as they face more complex texts:

Close reading model lessons, from Achieve the Core: <http://achievethecore.org/page/752/close-reading-model-lessonsclose-reading-exemplars>

Research on vocabulary instruction, by David Liben: <https://docs.gatesfoundation.org/documents/literacyconveningvocabularyresearchbase.pdf>

A Primer on Close Reading, by the Aspen Institute: <http://www.aspendrl.org/portal/browse/DocumentDetail?documentId=1396&download>

An article on challenging academically talented, advanced readers, by Scholastic: <http://www.scholastic.com/teachers/article/smart-and-bored>

An article on teaching with complex texts, by Marzano: <http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/dec12/vol70/num04/Analyzing-Complex-Texts.aspx>

Finally, here’s a blog post by Timothy Shanahan, Distinguished Professor Emeritus at the University of Illinois at Chicago. He describes a scaffolding technique to help students comprehend complex sentences. See the sidebar for many other great literacy-related posts. <http://www.shanahanonliteracy.com/2013/12/grammar-and-comprehension-scaffolding.html>

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Title: Author:** | | |
| **Quantitative Measure of Text Complexity** | | |
| Word Count: | Lexile Measure: | Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level: |
| **Qualitative Dimensions of Text Complexity** | | |
| **Levels of Meaning (literary texts) or Purpose (informational texts)**   |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | | Single level of meaning |  |  | Multiple levels of meaning |  |  |  | | --- | --- | | Explicitly stated purpose | Implicit purpose | | **Comments:** | | | | |
| **Text Structure**   |  |  | | --- | --- | | Simple | Complex |  |  |  | | --- | --- | | Conventional | Unconventional | | **Comments:** | | | | |
| **Language Conventionality and Clarity**   |  |  | | --- | --- | | Literal | Figurative or ironic |  |  |  | | --- | --- | | Clear | Ambiguous or purposefully misleading |  |  |  | | --- | --- | | Contemporary, familiar | Archaic or otherwise unfamiliar |  |  |  | | --- | --- | | Conversational | General academic and domain-specific | | **Comments:** | | | | |
| **Knowledge Demands: Life Experiences**   |  |  | | --- | --- | | Single or simple theme | Multiple, complex, or sophisticated theme(s) |  |  |  | | --- | --- | | Single or familiar perspective | Multiple or unfamiliar perspective(s) | | **Comments:** | | | | |
| **Knowledge Demands: Cultural or Content Knowledge**   |  |  | | --- | --- | | Grade appropriate academic knowledge | Specialized cultural or content knowledge |  |  |  | | --- | --- | | No references/allusions to other texts | Many references/allusions to other texts | | **Comments:** | | | | |

1. The band levels themselves have been expanded slightly over the original CCSS scale that appears in Appendix A at both the top and bottom of each band to provide for a more modulated climb toward college and career readiness and offer slightly more overlap between bands. The wider band width allows more flexibility in the younger grades where students enter school with widely varied preparation levels. This change was provided in response to feedback received since publication of the original scale (published in terms of the Lexile® metric) in Appendix A. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Since Flesch-Kincaid has no ‘caretaker’ that oversees or maintains the formula, the research leads worked to bring the measure in line with college and career readiness levels of text complexity based on the version of the formula used by Coh-Metrix. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)